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Bird Life among the Galapagos Islands

BY R. H. BECK

ILLUSTRATED WITH PHOTOGRAPHS BY THE AUTHOR

WHILE looking at the chart today to see how far we were from San Francisco I happened to compare our position, Latitude $19^{\circ} 24' N.$, Long. $116^{\circ} 12' W.$, with that of last year on the 19th of July and found that we were within five miles of our noon position on that date. We were then returning from the Galapagos Islands and the word Galapagos brought to mind a half promise I had made (wasn't it last January?) that some day when not too busy I would write a note or two about the trip. Today I can hardly claim to be too busy, tho there are three boobies lying on the table waiting to be skinned. They can wait till tomorrow.

To the bird collector who is accustomed to the comparative wildness of most California birds, the Galapagos Islands provide an interesting change in the curiosity, and disregard for man, of their feathered inhabitants. To the 'camerist' who has been used to spending hours and sometimes days trying to photograph a mocking bird on its nest, the unusual opportunities that here present themselves for bird photography are to be long remembered with pleasure. I call to mind now my troubles on Tower Island in getting a picture of a *Nesomimus bauri* at her nest. No sooner had I placed the camera in position and waited a moment for the frolicsome parent to get properly stationed than up flew two more mockers who proceeded to investigate the camera and incidentally the nest of their neighbor. Of course this intrusion was not to be allowed by any bird of spirit so I had to wait while she, with the assistance of her spouse, who had been busy chasing off an impudent *Geospiza pachyryncha*, cleared their tree of the intruders. She then kindly consented to my wishes and after posing in several positions I selected one that

displayed her to good advantage and pressed the bulb. Another occasion I must always remember with keenest regret was when the presence of a Baur mocker should have afforded a couple of extremely interesting photographs. The story runs like this. After spending a forenoon tramping over the piled up lava and obtaining various photographs, I reached the cliff above the beach where our boat was waiting. As I sprang across a chasm a night heron jumped from a well built nest and stood on a limb of the tree squawking at me. Seeing a chance to get bird, eggs and nest on one plate the opportunity was eagerly grasped. But much to my disappointment after I had moved up closer for the third time and was beautifully situated for a picture, the bird deliberately hopped down and walked away. A nearby mocker however, seeing my evident anxiety, came to the rescue, and dropping down into the nest commenced picking at the eggs! This would have made a good picture, and I was only eight feet away, but the heron, seeing the impudence of *Nesomimus*, threw fear of the camera to the winds and stepping back to the edge of the nest afforded me the exquisite pleasure of pressing the bulb just as she was making a stealthy poke at the intent mocker. This was so



NESOMIMUS BAURI, TOWER ISLAND

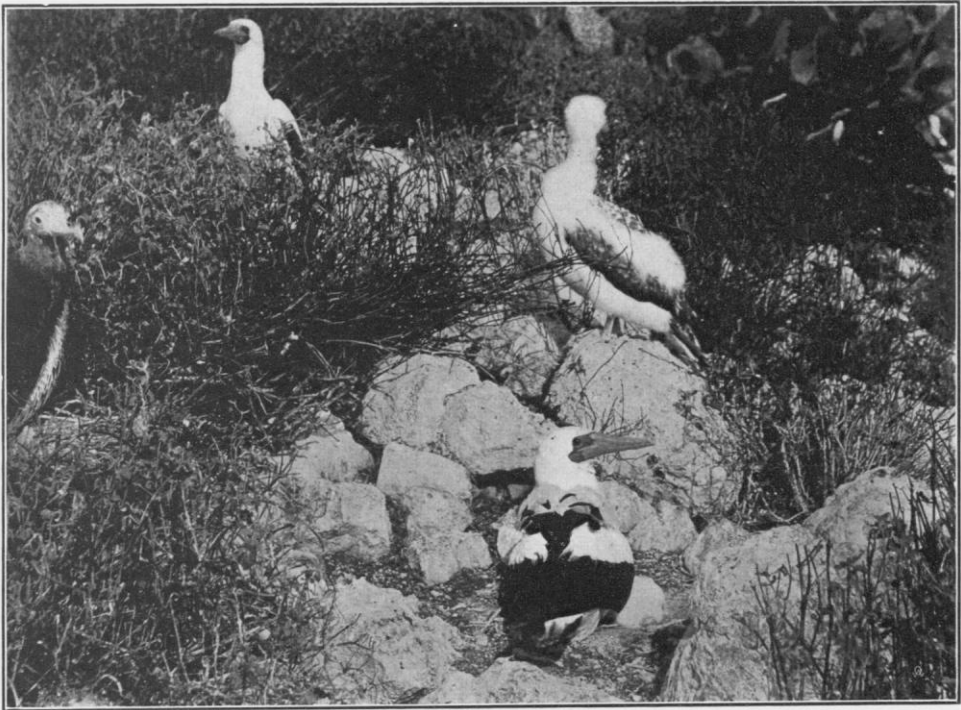
fine a subject, that I changed the camera slightly, focused carefully, rapidly slid in the plate-holder, yanked out the slide and obtained a view of heron and mocker fighting, on *the same plate* with the first picture! I finally managed to get another view showing the mocker still in the nest with the heron in the background.^a

Most of the small birds belong to the genera *Geospiza* or *Certhidea*, and as they build domed nests the birds are usually concealed from view while nesting. Of the other three or four genera, *Myiarchus* builds in cavities of trees and *Dendroica* so high up on slender limbs that photographing the nest is difficult. *Pyrocephalus*, the handsome little flycatcher, builds a pretty nest and can easily be photographed on it whenever it is within reach.

But when one starts on the water birds, subjects inexhaustible are ever present, and pictures without number can be secured showing bird life in all phases. The bird affording the greatest variety of poses and nesting situations is the Neboux booby (*Sula nebouxi*). We were greatly surprised on Daphne Island to

^a See *Bird Lore*, Dec., 1903 for this picture.—ED.

find down in the sandy bed of an old crater a nesting colony of these boobies. The air was extremely hot, and numerous skeletons scattered about showed a heavy mortality from some cause, possibly the heat; but more than likely they were of young birds, whose parents had ceased to feed them, and which were unable to rise out of the crater. So steep are the sides that the birds usually have to circle around in the crater several times before they can fly out. On Brattle Island, which is nothing but the rocky north side of an old crater, Neboux boobies nest in the sandy spots on top of the ridge, 900 feet high, where the wind keeps them cool during the nesting season. At Tagus Cove, Albemarle Island, we find them with still different surroundings. Here they nest on narrow ledges on the cliffs a few feet above the water. We rowed over to a small colony one morning and I secured a few pictures at close range. In fact it was necessarily very close for it

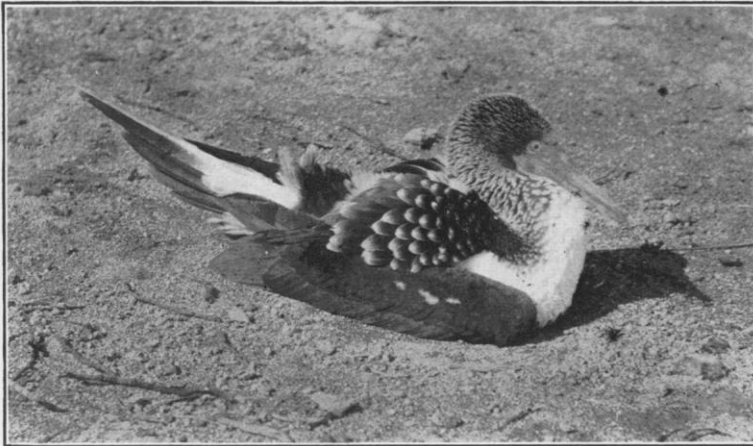


VARIEGATED BOOBIES AND FRIGATE BIRD

was all I could do to maintain my balance on the sliding rocks while I focused on the sitting birds. Matters were further complicated by an irate female, sitting just behind me, who wanted to puncture my legs every time I moved an inch or two in her direction. And this reminds me: to all picture-takers who contemplate visiting the Galapagos Islands I would strongly recommend the purchase of a good brand of cast-iron leggings. From my experience of three trips I am convinced they will be just the thing. They will save lots of bad words and tempers caused by unseen cactus spines that are always in ambush for the unwary, and I can testify that on more than one occasion they would have saved me from some awful scars that frigate birds, boobies, and iguanas have given me. But to return to our Neboux boobies. The amorous love song of the male is uttered in a spread eagle attitude that may cause the photographer to titter, but even so, I hope some

one will take the time to snap it in several different poses for I intend to mount one in that attitude some day and will need photographic evidence that it is not a purely theoretical position. The manner in which he lifts his feet and puts them down in the same place, with swaying, downcast head and a suggestion of being a bold, bad individual is worthy of prolonged effort to reproduce. Another excellent subject is a large flock of Neboux boobies diving in unison for fish. This picture can be easily obtained on a little bay in Albemarle Island and I shall always be sorry that limited time prevented me from getting it while we were anchored there.

The variegated booby, a larger bird than *Sula nebouxi* is an easy subject for the photographer as it nests usually on the edge of high cliffs above the ocean. Sometimes a refractory bird proves obdurate and leaves much to be guessed at in the picture, but often the expenditure of a little time and patience yields abundant fruit. I recall one instance when I wanted a picture showing different ages and plumages. The half grown booby that I wanted particularly with a pleasant expression on his face, was very troublesome. After getting the camera placed and



NEBOUX BOOBY

properly focused showing an old bird and her downy young I started to pose the youngster who didn't want his picture 'took.' I fussed and fumed while he continually hopped and moved around everywhere but the right place. Once he got too near the old lady on the nest and she proceeded to chastise him in a manner that afforded me infinite satisfaction. After being thoroughly mauled by her he managed to struggle up on his perch but even then he disdained to turn his face toward the camera and I had to take the back of his head. During the fracas the camera was slightly moved and failed to get in the whole of an interested frigate bird that I wished to show owing to her proximity to the nesting booby. The young booby being fed is a subject I did not get, the camera always being on ship-board when I saw the process, but still better than this will be the picture of an old pelican feeding its two or three young. Perhaps some one in America has already obtained pictures of this seemingly suicidal operation for the pelican is much commoner there than in the Galapagos.

Webster boobies (*Sula websteri*) nest entirely in bushes and trees on the Galapagos Islands and pictures showing all phases of their life are readily obtained. An

interesting feature regarding these boobies is the coloration of the adult birds. In the Galapagos nineteen out of twenty of the breeding birds are of the grayish type while in the Revillagigedo Islands, about 1200 miles northwest, ninety-nine out of a hundred are of the white type.

Frigate birds which breed commonly on many of the outlying rocks and small islands offer many views worthy of reproduction. Nests are placed on the ground or in bushes and the absence of fear in this species renders photography an easy task. The actions of the frigates during the nesting season afforded me much amusement. Imagine one of those great, ungainly birds sitting on the nest by his mate, one wing thrown lovingly over her back, while he rubs his bill against hers, and utters low beseeching requests for her to notice him. I will say for the female I saw, that she seemed quite bored by his attentions during the time they were under observation! The manner in which a female will unceremoniously

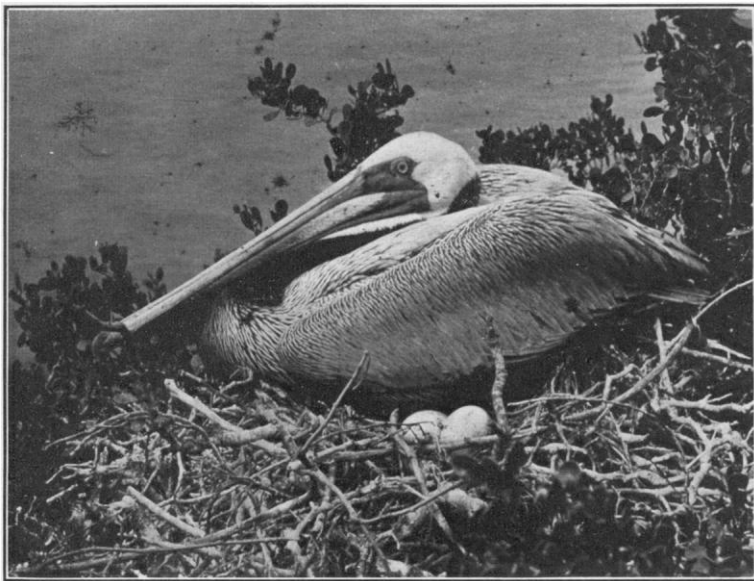


FRIGATE BIRDS ON NEST, BRATTLE ISLAND

hustle her partner off the nest when she returns from her morning exercise is highly edifying. It is quite possible that the poor henpecked fellow sometimes resents her harsh greeting and pulls the egg from the nest in pure spite. We found eggs very often on the edge of the nest or on the ground nearby, and it would be an easy matter for a bird to pull the egg off the nest as it is flat on top and the egg is held between the feet. I am tempted to think that polyandry is practiced by these birds for more than once when the male was scared from a nest on which a female was sitting, another male would swoop down and settle in his place. When a nest is once started one bird must remain on it all the time for the moment it is left unprotected, males from surrounding nests fly to it and carry off the sticks, so that in a few minutes time not a vestige of a structure remains. The young frigate birds grow slowly and occupy the nest for a long time, sitting on it in a dejected attitude that reminds one of a sick chicken.

The red-billed tropic birds (*Phaethon æthereus*) which nest on a few of the islands interested me greatly. Their flight and call as they wheeled and darted about the high cliffs closely resembled that of the white throated swifts in California. On Daphne Island where they were common, several of their nests were in small caves in the sandstone cliffs, being quite similar to the nests of duck hawks in the islands along the Lower California coast. Usually they select some crevice among the loose rocks for a nest, altho on San Benedicto Island of the Revillagigedos very often a burrow of the wedge-tailed shearwater is used. In this section of the world the tropic bird wanders as far away from land as the frigate bird. We found both this species and the red-tailed tropic bird more than 600 miles from any island.

The flamingo is one of the birds that can be photographed at close range in the Galapagos but the day I discovered this fact, the camera was on shipboard and we had not time to return for it. It seems that the flight feathers of the flamingo are



CALIFORNIA BROWN PELICAN ON NEST

moulted all at once, for four of the birds obtained that day had not a single one of the old primaries in their wings and the new feathers were just starting. On a former occasion when I attempted to photograph a group of five birds my haste in trying to reach a favorable spot scared them, but as they rose twenty yards away I threw up the camera and pressed the bulb before the camera was steady. The resulting picture is ten long streaks where the legs dangled across the plate and a confused blur showing in place of the bodies.

When one has to back away from a flock of teal to get a fair shot, and then cannot obtain it because the birds run along the beach and swim in the water toward him you have an idea of the tameness of the birds. When this happened to me the first time I was short of cartridges and wanted to get several birds at a shot, but when the whole flock started toward me both on land and water to see what strange thing was approaching I concluded we could dispense with ducks for that day and left them as unafraid as before. Often after that on approaching

the edge of a small pond or lagoon the teal would swim up within a few feet, the males uttering their soft we-u we-u as they jealously guarded their mates from the advances of a rival.

I have made no mention of the shearwaters, penguins, gulls, terns, or oyster-catchers but all of these are tame and I have pictures of each in their favorite attitudes. The petrels, even, that nest on one of the islands seem not to have the usual fear of their kind for they fly about and enter their nests by day as well as by night. To stand on a high cliff above the ocean and watch a great flock of petrels darting about you like a swarm of bees, with the pungent smell of their oil in the nostrils, and the muffled tuc, tuc, tucoo, tucoo of many shearwaters rising out of the cracks in the lava underfoot, while beautiful gulls and harsh-voiced boobies and frigate birds join in resenting your intrusion upon a spot where man never stood before, is a pleasure that more than offsets the scratches received in getting there. And the albatrosses! What fun it was to watch them at their peculiar fencing exercise. To see a big albatross walk up to another big fellow with all the swagger of a Bowery tough and bow to him as ceremoniously and gravely as a prime minister could, and then to see them fence with their bills as rapidly as do swordsmen with light rapiers, is a sight I will never forget. Nor will I soon forget the old rascal, who came for me on the dead run and who, if I had not luckily cracked him on the head with the butt of my collecting pistol, would have lunged his powerful beak half way through me. An odd fact about the albatrosses is the direction of their flight from the island. They fly straight out to



RED-BILLED TROPIC BIRD AND NEST

the southward and none are seen about the north side of the island nor about any of the other islands. We were on the island two days before we found them tho the island is not more than four miles across and there were hundreds of the birds.

There are numerous other things to amuse and interest the visitor to this isolated group of islands. From the little fiddler crabs that suddenly disappear before one's eyes on the beach to the flaming volcano that as suddenly appears on the mountain top, there is something to observe continually. Tho I have been there three times, I hope to make yet another trip to those isles where the turtle sleeps unmolested on the beach, and the bark of a seal or the weird cry of a far-away penguin are the last sounds of the night one hears as he drops into grateful slumber.

Lat. 19° 24' N., Long. 116° 12' W., July 10, 1903.